

# Mapping Margins within Margins: Engendered Minorities in Mahasweta Devi's *Shanichari* and Dharmabhai Shrimali's *The Hell*

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Received 26 December 2016, received in revised form 20 January 2017, accepted 25 January 2017

**Abstract:** The neologism 'Kyriarchy' and the feminist sociological theory of intersectionality envisage the notions of gender, race, class, disability and other axes of identity as intersecting frames of marginalization, often operating on simultaneous terrains and thus contributing to systematic social hierarchies. The socio-cultural matrix of oppression confirms the presence of a multilayered and multidimensional frame for defining the social order. The notions of gender and caste, in particular, seem to uphold a shared space when analyzed through the lens of the hegemonic powers, but intersect each other when investigated individually as there are margins within margins. In the present paper I seek to investigate the two tier hierarchies with a specific attention to the Indian social order comprising the mainstream v/s the marginalized as Dalits and Tribals; and the marginalized v/s the marginalized within these communities. With the focus on Mahasweta Devi's 'Shanichari', a translated Bengali short story about a tribal girl, fettered with virtual slave trade in the façade of democracy and the betrayal by her own community, and 'The Hell' a Gujarati Dalit short story of an untouchable woman Ratan, forced into the repugnant and nauseating task of public toilet cleaning, the present paper proposes to excavate the gendered causes for their socio-political exploitation. It argues that their intersectional identity as women and belonging to a minority community leads to their double victimization from outside and within their own communities. The paper refers to the theories of intersectionality and feminist Marxism together with other short stories about such minorities in support of its argument.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Being a woman in a patriarchal society is a reflection of the multiple identities that one internalizes in being a wife, a mother or a daughter, but with a cemented reality which posits man at the center of these relations, and woman moving only around the periphery in the myriad forms of social affinities. The paper here submits an excerpt from the story *Shanichari* which asks, "Don't you know the (story) about the carpenter who carved a girl out of wood and became her father? The weaver who gave her clothes and became her brother? The goldsmith who gifted her jewellery and became her uncle? Didn't the sindoorwala bring her to life by giving her sindoor?" (35) These questions, meandering in the world of children playing with dolls, leave the twelve year girl puzzled because she is only a young girl, too young to internalize the cultural

significance of these questions. She is unable to understand that the reality of the wooden doll is actually her reality, together with those countless women who silently bear the stigma of being the second in the man-woman dichotomy.

Subservience of the female self finds its expression through a vortex of several unrestrained measures. The laws of Manu, ages and ages back, prescribed that in childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons, a woman must never be independent. Thus, whether it is by rejecting the privilege of a simple self assertion, or by transcending a systematic manipulation of the parochial gendered dimensions of power, whether it is victimizing the essentialized self through the brutal canons of patriarchy, or by locating the female body as a testing ground for an over-riding sense of masculinity, subordination always leads to an aberration of one's identity.

However, confronting this notion of otherness in the social gender order pushes one into a rather ill balanced equation of difference. It brings to fore a raging debate on whether or not to accept the question of homogeneity in experiencing this difference. It is at this juncture that one is directed towards questioning the polemics of the feminist and Marxist tradition in defining the male control of the female sexuality. With multiple hierarchies tacitly institutionalized as the defining paradigms of the social order, it becomes imperative to explore how the social mechanism works to maintain its status quo. What position do women hold in this social hierarchy? Does the experience of being controlled confer a homogenized status? If yes, in what respect? If no, then how do we categorize this difference?

Triggered by these questions and with Catharine Mackinnon's perception that "Whatever women have in common is considered to be based in nature, not in society"(5), I seek to investigate in the present paper the two tier hierarchies with a specific attention to the Indian social order comprising the mainstream v/s the marginalized as Dalits and Tribals, and the marginalized with caste and tribal marginalities as compared with the marginalized on the terrain of gender. In my exploration of these marginal discourses, I focus my attention to the two marginalized women coming from two different

backward communities. The first is Shanichari from Mahasweta Devi's story *Shanichari*, a tribal girl burdened with not only an ill-fated name but also with a blighted destiny of being fettered with human trafficking and betrayed by her own community when desperately needing support. The second one Ratan, is a character from a Gujarati writer Dharmabhai Shrimali's story *The Hell* and represents the hapless untouchable Dalit community. Ratan painfully embodies a Gujarati poet Kantilal Katil's words "the heap of waste paper is my father / and plastic bag my mother" when forced into the repugnant and nauseating task of public toilet cleaning. With a chequered statement of their lifestyle presented in the stories, I propose to maintain that their intersectional identity as women and belonging to minority communities leads to their double victimization by outside and within their own communities.

The feminist sociological theory of intersectionality and the neologism 'Kyriarchy' propose that the socio-cultural matrix of oppression functions with a multi-layered and multidimensional frame for defining the social order. Kathy Davis in her comprehensive journal article "Intersectionality as buzzword" (2008) characterizes the term as "the interaction between gender, race and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power" (68). For Davis the term occupies a significantly relevant place for precisely addressing the "issue of difference among women by providing a handy catch phrase that aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and power relations that are central to it" (70). In fact as Stephanie A. Shields argues in another article "Gender: An Intersectional Perspective", the individual's social location as reflected in the intersecting identities must be at the forefront in any investigation of gender for, 'it is impossible to talk about gender without considering other dimensions of social structure/social identity that play a formative role in gender's operation and meaning" (72).

The social location of both Shanichari and Ratan delineates a grievously unprivileged standing in their communities which are abjectly discarded by the main stream. For satisfying the never ending struggle of life and the insatiable hunger, Ratan is forced to learn the art of disposing off the carcasses of dogs and cats, with nauseating stench and the swarming worms on the swollen body because her mother tells her, "If we do not go, we will have to listen to their rebukes. People give only a fistful of grain. That too, they will not" (n.pag.). It is not just a matter of a handful of grains, for the meticulousness ensures Ratan's marriage to a comparatively better sweeper family which is an undeniable requisite for any woman of her caste. For Shanichari the plight is even more heart rending because the struggle is not just about getting at least the half meal a day but saving her from being sold to the owners of the brick-kilns of Calcutta. The layers of marginalization are distinctly visible in this case as

charged with the euphoria of revolution through the Adivasi Raksha Morcha, the marginalized tribes stand for their rights but are brutally plundered by the political mainstream of paramilitary forces, killing, torturing, plundering and destroying these minorities, razing their huts and shelter to the ground, leaving people with no grain to eat and no cloth to drape, and taking the second in the hierarchy of the marginalized - the young girls and women into the forest and finally raping them. Mahasweta Devi at this point asks her readers, 'Kaise bache? How does one survive' (44)? Shanichari loses her lover Chand Tirkey in this battle and finally succumbs to the torrential circumstances of submitting herself in the hands of Gohuman Bibi, the dealer of the city capitalists. Ratan too gets married but only to find a greater deterioration in the hands of a drunkard-gambler husband, beating her every night even before she opens her mouth to register her suffocation and resigned entity.

Anupama Rao in theorizing her framework about caste, gender and atrocities on women confronts a pressing question, "why is everyone interested in marginalized women, as the most subaltern of subalterns? Why are we drawn to the extremes of Indian society as a meaningful place from where we might speak about social reality?" (209) Encountering a similar inquiry the theorists on the notions of intersectionality and Kyriarchy suggest that the structures of oppression derive their meaning from an intra-categorical complexity. Elizabeth Fiorenza, who coined the term Kyriarchy, believes that in the multiplicative system of domination and submission a person, owing to this entangled status of marginalization is oppressed in one context but might be privileged in another. In the present context for instance, all the girls exported with Shanichari experience a similar intra-categorical exploitation. Mahasweta Devi projects their deplorable condition how these oppressed women become a medium of de-stressing for the male proletariats of the brick kiln. "Joshima, Lugri, Jhini, Parai and Phulmani faced the worst. You work all day in Kiln. No matter how many bricks you actually carry, you get not more than fifteen rupees a week.... From the fifteen rupees you buy a week's ration of rice and salt ... tea, khaini, oil all come out of that money. At the end of the day when you're too tired to keep your eyes open, the head Mastaan will call out your name in the daily auction. Today you go to him, tomorrow the driver, the day after the munshi.... They force liquor down your throat till you pass out. Pull off your clothes, what happens next only your body knows" (50-51). For exploring the exploited archetype of Ratan one doesn't have to actually refer to her story and the paper purposely shifts the narrative to a passage in Bama's *Sangati* which recapitulates not just Ratan's story but transcends a socially sanctioned reality of these marginalized women, exemplifying another instance of the intra-categorical domination and providing an appropriate addressing to Anupama Rao's questions. Dalit women like Ratan, as Bama

describes, are pestered both inside and outside their home. After facing the back breaking work beside the harassment of the landlord, they don't even have a moment of peace. "Night after night they must give in to their husband's pleasure. Even if a woman's body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom and exhaustion because of all this" (59). Compared with the circumstances of these suppressed and crushed women, their men have a better disposition as Bama observes, "They still control their women, rule over them and find their pleasure. Within the home, they lay down the law, their word is scripture" (59).

With an engaging interface with the reality of the women like Shanichari and Ratan it naturally follows that the subaltern women cannot speak. However, in this context, both Ratan and Shanichari raise their voice and shift our attention to a rather uninitiated question, 'What happens when the subaltern speaks?' Shanichari, after reaching the brick kiln, discovers that the promise of Gohuman Bibi about Chamak – Chamak saris and jewellery along with sufficient meals twice a day proves only a trap and also that she has to give up her life and dreams to the interior colonization of Rahmat, the owner of the kiln. She refuses to fall as a victim of this sadistic psycho-physical imprisonment and openly announces her will to return to her village. As an outcome of her bravery she ironically wins the prize of being Rahmat's personal asset, a shareholder in his lavish meat curry and rice, the freedom from the wretched life of a labourer and gets all material pleasures because "Rahmat would dress Shanichari in good clothes and nice jewellery, rub fragrant oil in her hair – and then tear into her ruthlessly" (51). Ratan too, at the other end, doesn't let the municipal overseer succeed in his mal intentions and is assigned the task of cleaning the stinking public toilets, virtually living the worst experience of a Harijan woman in a TV documentary show she gets to watch in her locality, where the woman is shown standing amidst the heap of feces with a broken tin on the head: "Feces trickled down from it. It ran from head to face and swiftly trickled down her neck" (n. pag).

The comparison between the condition of women of the mainstream and the poor desolate women like Shanichari and Ratan is, as Mahasweta Devi perceives, a theoretical question for how can the mainstream understand their condition when their own community doesn't help them? Shanichari does come back with other girls but because of being ironically privileged, she comes back pregnant with a diku's, i.e. the upper caste man's

child in her womb and is disowned by her community. Having experienced oppression for ages, how could their village priest allow a woman carrying a diku's child to be accepted in society? When reminded of facing a similar situation in the future, i.e., "There could be more Shanicharis in the future. Should we cast out our own women? Will that benefit our society" (54)? The community priest unburdens himself by saying, "W'll think about it if it happens again. Not now" (54) fortifying the idea that Bama postulates and designates that privilege of the unprivileged which the Marathi poet Govindraj describes in these words, "Hindu society is made up of men who bow their heads to the kicks from above and who simultaneously give a kick below, never thinking to resist the one or refrain from the other" (kakar 27).

To categorize the politics of difference and mapping the margins within margins, one has to think about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others. The processes of subordination and the various ways those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated draw our attention to the most pressing problem that is not the existence of the categories, but rather the particular values attached to them and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies. Thus in my opinion to explore these margins is in a way exploring the power dynamics that are governed by the dominant ideologies and further problematize the clash between the personal and the political.

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